Sengoku Period Warfare - Part 3: Infantry tactics

July 02, 2018

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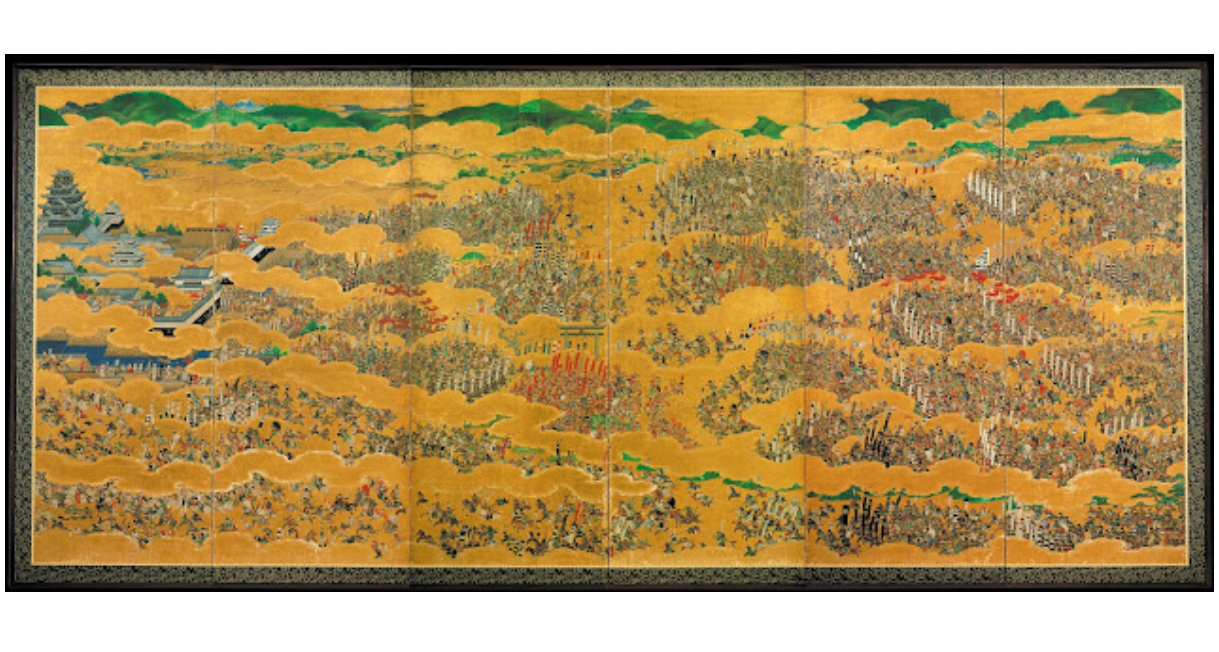
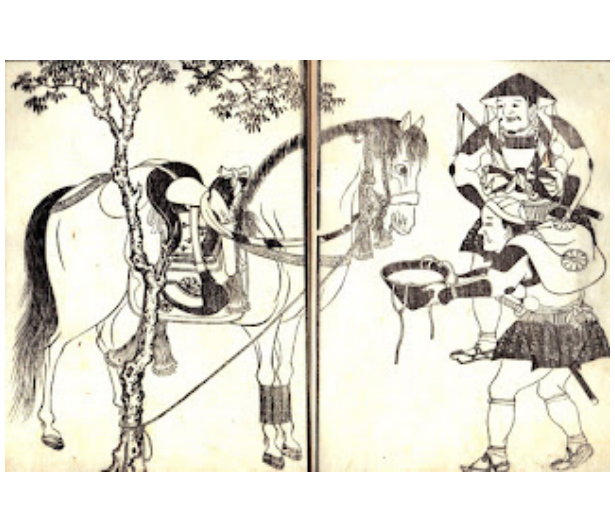


The full Osaka campaign battle screen - 大坂夏の陣図屏風

This is a continuation of previous articles describing the warfare of the Sengoku period, if you are interested in ***Battle formations*** *and* ***Cavalry tactics****, consider reading the previous parts!*

The Sengoku period was the **age of infantry troops**: as I have stressed in other articles, the backbone of any army were the **Ashigaru (足軽)**, when used both as pikemen and as arquebusiers, and this article would be largely dedicated to them, with few exceptions.

In any case, before jumping into **infantry tactics**, it's important to define whom were these infantry troops first.
As I have explained in my army composition article, the units that fought on foot were the **ashigaru pikemen,** the **ashigaru bowmen,** the **ashigaru gunners** and the **samurai on foot**, both used as **ranged units** as well as **spearmen.**
For the sake of this article I will divide this troops in **melee units** and **ranged units**.



Two Ashigaru watering an horse, from the famous Zōhyō Monogatari

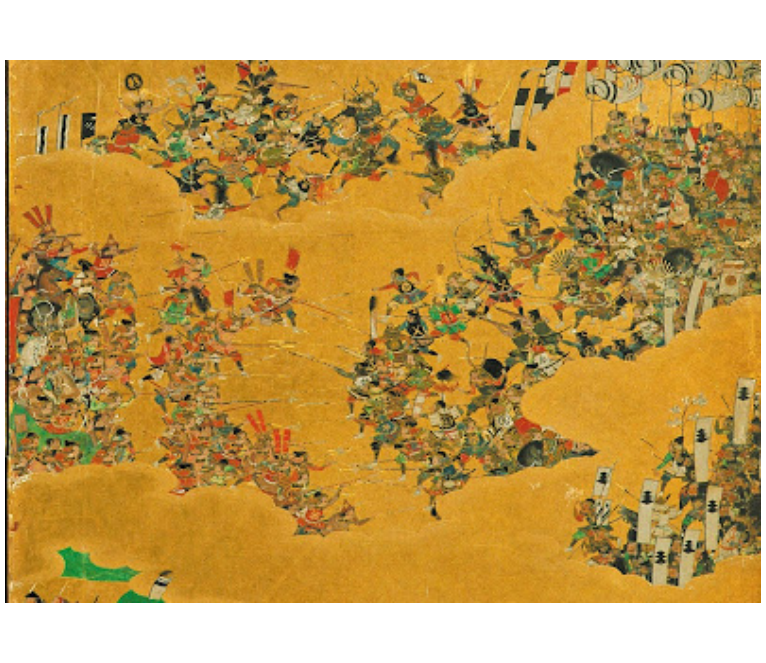
The role of the melee units

Melee units were primarily made by **Ashigaru pikemen**, issued with long pikes up to **8.2 meters in length** called **Nagae-yari (長柄槍)** and armored with munition grade armors.
These squads of pikemen were the majority of troops fielded by the Sengoku army up until the late 16th century, when guns started to be **mass produced**.

Pikes were incredibly effective in dealing against cavalry as well as foot soldiers, and the great length of this weapon allowed even the less skilled peasant to be effective.
The effectiveness of pike squadrons was the **key factor** to produce **large scale battles** in Japan during this period.
Pikes were also easy to produce, but required coordination to be used and were not ideal in very close quarter fights.
Within the period analyzed in this series (1560 onward), these ashigaru were drilled to work cohesively by the wealthier clans and developed **"massed tactics"**.

However, these units were incredibly **immobile** since to use these unwieldy pikes, formations were inevitable, and being composed by lowly rank foot soldiers, which weren't trained as much as the high ranking Samurai in the martial arts, they didn't have a great stability in terms of morale.

The main weaknesses of these units was their **rigidity**, which made them unable to deal in time against flanks of enemy troops such as cavalry charge, and being **cohesive** in formations, they were easy targets for ranged units; these two factors could made these units shatter rather quickly.



A detail of the Osaka screen - 大坂夏の陣図屏風

To support these pikes squadrons in their fights, **foot Samurai** stayed behind and inside the formations. These foot Samurai were either dismounted horsemen, their direct retainers or Samurai that usually fought on foot (a common practice in the western part of Japan due to terrain).
They counter the two main problems of pikes formations, namely the inability to deal with the enemies once they have passed the pike's points, but also to have troops able to deal with flanks in time without flaking the pike formation.

Foot Samurai were also the **main heavy infantries designed to perform shock tactics.** They wielded **polearms**, mainly spears but also various types of **percussive weapons.**
When **two pikes formations fought**, as soon as one of the two overcome the other, the Samurai **charged forward**, to annihilate the disorganized enemies, thanks to their experience and their shorter weapons.
The defeated squadron's Samurai on the other hand tried to stop the charging enemies, while their Ashigaru tried to recover the formation.

To create mayhem inside the enemy pikes squadrons, the Ashigaru used their weapons to thrust as well as to beat them with downward strikes, (*although the latter is* ***only found*** *as a reference in the* ***Zōhyō Monogatari*** *which was written in the middle of the 17th century)*

Melee units tactics

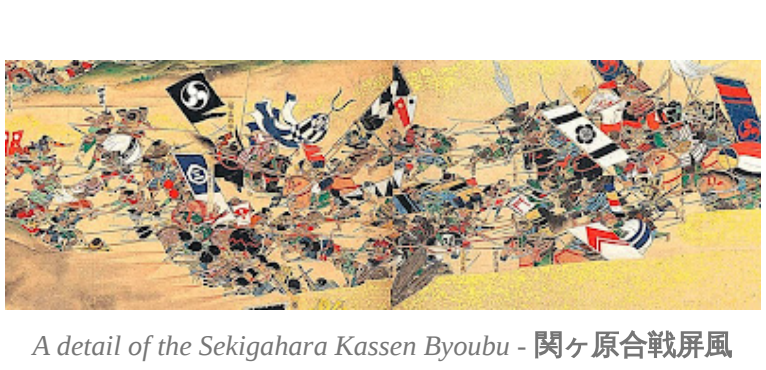
The Ashigaru and the Samurai on foot that fought together used essentially two tactics that could be described according to the enemy they were facing.

Yarigarami **(槍絡み)**

This is the context in which two or more **pikes squadrons** fought each other (the name itself means *spear's entanglement* and it's the equivalent of the western ***push of pike***), so it's infantry against infantry and it's the scenario I have described above; they tried to **break the enemy lines** with pikes, and then the Samurai charged in to **destroy the unit**. It was an high risk - high reward tactics; losing the fight meant losing the pike units.

Yaribusuma (槍衾)

This is a tactic used to deal against a frontal **cavalry charge;** it was also used against numerically superior enemies and it's an highly defensive tactic.
The concept behind is quite simple, trying to create a **dense wall of spears**, and the name could be translated to "*line of spears held at the ready".*
To perform this tactics and stop an enemy charge, at **least three ranks of pikes** were needed; the first line was kneeling, and their pikes where aimed at a low height.
In addition to that, in the same line, one soldier had his pike pointed forward, while the next to soldiers had their pikes crossed over to create an alternate series of *"scissors"*, whit the points facing down.
The second and the third rows were standing, and their pikes were aimed respectively at a medium and at an high height.
In this way, a spearheads wall was created, and when the horses approached the line, the soldiers in the first row who had their spear facing down were ordered to suddenly thrust the horse's belly.
If the charge was stopped, the Samurai behind the ranks would have charged forward to unset and kill the horsemen thanks to their shorter weapons.
This tactics required an **highly disciplined squadrons of Ashigaru.**



A detail of the Sekigahara Kassen Byoubu - 関ヶ原合戦屏風

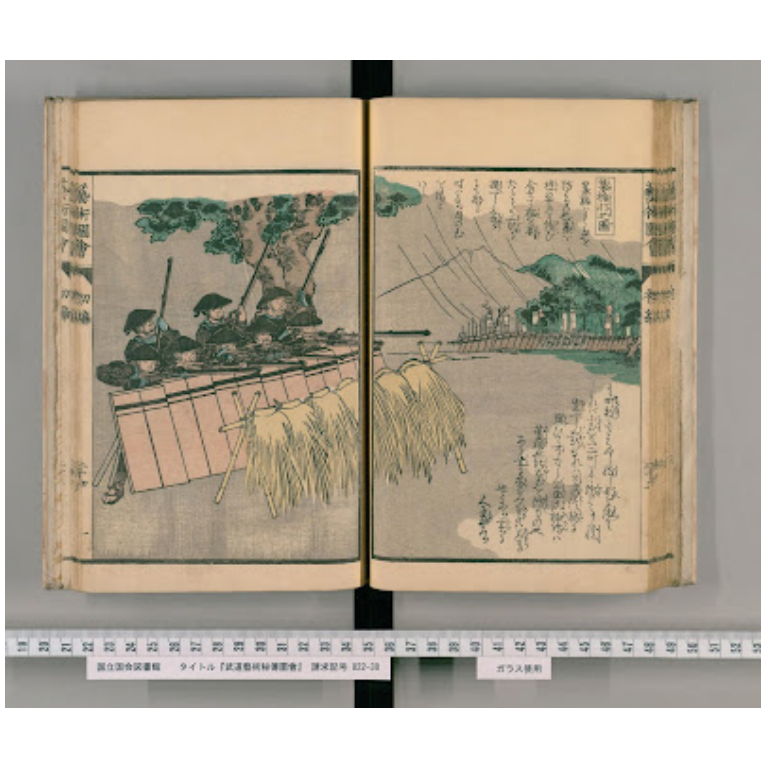
The role of the ranged units

Together with the pikes and foot Samurai, archers and gunners played key role in the battlefields of the late Sengoku period.
These were the troops that usually started the battles with an exchange of arrows and bullets volleys, and were the ones which inflicted the higher number of wounds.
By the 1580s, the **gun had replaced the bow** both in numbers of troops wielding one as well as importance of the weapon itself, since the **stopping power** of the arquebus is **far greater than the one of the bow**; however, they still played their role on the battles, especially during rainy weeks or when gunpowder's sources were limited.

In this later pariod, bowmen were mixed inside gun units with few exceptions; the bowmen job was to "snipe" enemy generals and protect the gunners when they were reloading to prevent the enemy to close the distance, while the arquebusiers were the one who did the volleys.

Although massed guns and archers are always associated with **Ashigaru,** is worth notice that units **entirely made of Samurai** wielding bows and/or arquebus existed too, although they were rare since the majority of the Samurai operated either in the pikes squadrons or in the cavalry corps.

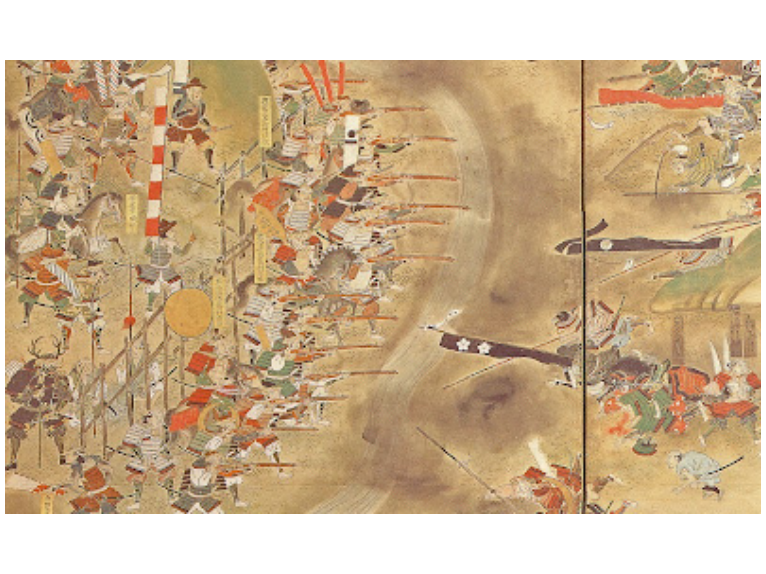
Most of the times these units operated as skirmishers and were separated from the main army, at least at the beginning of the battle.
They opened fire against the enemy ranged units as well as other infantries.
They were usually covered with **standing shields**, to avoid being decimated by the enemy projectiles.
However, being separated from the main army, the were easy target for cavalry charges, so they were usually supported by few pikes units or protected by fences.



Ashigaru shooting behind a cover of Tate shields - from **武道藝術秘傳圖會. [1]**

When the battle begun, pikes and cavalry started to approach the field, they retreated behind the allied lines and keep shooting at the enemies.

Although gunners units are famous for the **usage of the arquebus (鉄砲)** it's fair to point out that inside those units, **large caliber guns and hand cannons** called *Ōzutsu* **(大筒)** as well as **artillery pieces** known as *Taihō* **(大砲)** were used too, but they will have their dedicated article.



A detail of the famous **長篠合戦図屏風** *depicting firearms being deployed behind fences*

Ranged units - Bow tactics

Sashiyagakari **(指矢懸かり)**

This is a tactic that heavily relies on the higher rate of fire of the bow; all the bowmen in the units aimed for the closest enemy's gunners in order to suppress them with arrows. This tactic limited the enemy's movement and firing power

Ryōgakari **(両懸かり)**

This tactic has two version: one is the aforementioned "covering the reloading gunners with arrows", the other version is a combined attack with arrows and bullets volleys against another units, and when they retreat or interrupt the advance, the melee units rushed in.

Ranged units - Firearm tactics

Kurumauchi **(車撃ち)**

A variation of the more common "3 lines firing tactic" and it's associated with the **Shimazu** clan; the unit was divided into rows, and after the first row shoot, they went back behind the lines, while the unit advanced. Said technique required shooting while moving, and it was very hard to perform; as the troops advanced and the first row came back, the whole unit resemble a wheel spinning.

Sandanuchi **(三段撃ち)**

The famous "3 lines firing tactic" attributed to Oda Nobunaga; while **there is no evidence that it was performed for the first time at Nagashino**, by the 1590s it was a very common tactic.
In this tactic, there are three lines, while the first one is shooting, the second row is ready to shoot and the third one is reloading. In this way, **the volleys of bullets are extremely fast** and there is very little time in between them. This tactic required an very well drilled gunners unit.

I hope that you liked this article! Feel free to share it and leave a comment below!
And if you want to know more about **Battle tactics,** here is the 4th part of this series:

Sengoku Period Warfare: Part 4 - Battle tactics

Gunbai

General History Tactics

The GhostHero 4 July 2018 at 12:31

I have a question. How different is pre tanegashima warfare from tanegashima like in the 15th century and the onin war? I'm very interested in this era and information are really difficult to find, because often it cover either before or after .

> **Gunsen History** 4 July 2018 at 13:23
>
> I have to say that I am no expert in this period, which as you said, is sadly always overlooked by historians.
> I might write an article in the future, but the thing is that the 15th century was a relatively peaceful century, at least for the first 60 years.
> There were mainly few skirmishes and revolts during the first part, with the exception of the Onin war and the beginning of the Sengoku period, which by this time period was still very "mild" compared to the 16th century.
>
> The Samurai of this period either fought on foot with polearms or bows, or on horseback operating as shock troops, with a decline of horse archery in favor of polearms and spears .
> We start to see an early form of Ashigaru, peasants and mercenaries more or less trained and drilled in spear tactics as well as mass archery tactics, and during the Onin war there are also mentions of bombs, fire lances and man powered mangonels.
> The armor were mainly Dou maru and Haramaki, as well as Hara ate mainly made of lamellae but we start to see the usage of laminated plates as well.
>
> There's a lot to say actually: I think I should write something in the future, because the space in the comment is limited, but for now, you might consider this warfare period as an hybrid between the late Sengoku and the Nanbokucho period.
> Hope that this was helpful!
>
> **The GhostHero** 5 July 2018 at 10:36
>
> Thanks! It confirmed the few things I know about this periods, I look forward to this post ;)

REPLY

春秋戰國 4 July 2018 at 21:10

I actually have trouble visualising Yaribusuma, mainly due to the fact that I have read several confusing descriptions on the tactic. I also can't figure out the reason for scissoring the pikes.

Also, I'd like to learn more about 釣瓶打ち

> **Gunsen History** 5 July 2018 at 06:24
>
> Hi 春秋戰國 it's nice to see you here again!
>
> I can understand your trouble; there are many military manuals from the Edo period onward and each one might have a different view on how pikes should have been used, which actually gives you a picture of many clans fighting styles.
> To better understand the one I've described, here there are two sketches that might help:
>
> https://i.pinimg.com/originals/60/5a/13/605a1375e51ac4aca4380e80d8568736.jpg
>
> http://i.imgur.com/FBOfMHm.jpg
>
> The reason behind having pikes scissored (in theory) is this: when the horse is close enough, he should be scared by the pikes pointing forward, while the ones pointing down should be raised to thrust his belly with an upward strike.
> I can understand that reading this might be even more confusing, but in the pictures above there is an example of an horse charging against two ashigaru with scissored pikes.
>
> About the 釣瓶打ち or Tsurubeuchi: is more like an individual skill of the arquebusiers rather than a precise tactic, as far as I know (again, there are different variations so I might be wrong). It's about shooting very fast with your gun, and it could be translated as "ripple-fire" or "quick-fire"; it was used by the Date against the Uesugi in the 1600.
> This video might gives you an idea on how fast they could be:
> https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i-lGCtbg580
>
> Sometimes it is also described (or performed by modern reenactors) as a way of shooting in line; instead of shooting at the same time, there is a quick succession, so they shoot after the men on the right has fired and so on
> This video might help:
> https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_wfKLE66YFg
>
> Hope that this might help!
> By the way the next article of this series would deal with Tsurinobuse, woodpecker tactics and so on, which I realized just now that were the ones you were asking for! (sorry for the delay!!)
>
> **春秋戰國** 5 July 2018 at 19:39
>
> The image you linked seems to show the troops scissoring their pikes horizontally, I am even more confused now.
>
> https://samurai-world.com/yari-busuma/
>
> **Gunsen History** 6 July 2018 at 12:49
>
> You are actually right, my bad! I have confused horizontally with vertically in my article, I'll correct it, thank you!
>
> The concept behind this tactic is to create a dense wall of spear; I have to say that now I'm speculating about this feature since my original interpretation is quite off.
>
> Anyway I think that the purpose behind scissoring the pikes is, in case an enemy is able to bypass the spear heads, to have an ultimate line of defense with the shaft, in a way that the enemy is trapped in between the two shafts.
> This however only apply if the enemy is a person.
> Also having some pikes pointing in different directions might help striking the horse's belly from the sides I believe, and this is what I originally founded in my sources (which didn't say much honestly, something like scissoring pikes = to better thrust the horse's belly)
>
> I really don't know if this scissor was used too often: I have read it from modern books and I suspect it might came from the Zoyo Monogatari, the same that claims that smashing pikes is the best way to use them... I'll try to investigate further!

REPLY

Ninda 29 September 2018 at 13:28

Please from which book are taken those photo with yaribusuma

> **Gunsen History** 30 September 2018 at 03:37
>
> Hi!
> If I'm correct, they came from this book: "歴史・時代小説ファン必携 【絵解き】戦国武士の合戦心得 (講談社文庫)". It's a little old but still valuable.

REPLY

Kazanshin 20 August 2019 at 16:49

Sorry for digging this up if you're reading this, but can you tell me if there's any chance that Nobunaga used the 三段撃ち or 車撃ち? I know the whole Nagashino thing was pretty much a hoax, but I can't help but wonder if he ever used fire-by-rank tactics in his military career.

> **Kazanshin** 20 August 2019 at 16:50
>
> I'm asking simply out of personal curiosity. My family is distantly related to the Oda, and Nobunaga was always an idol like figure to me.
>
> **Gunsen History** 21 August 2019 at 14:14
>
> How cool is that you are somewhat related to Nobunaga!! That's awesome indeed!
>
> About your question, chances are fairly possible, but there are no first hand historical accounts of the battle that give us the usage of those battle tactics.
> In my opinion, some type of mass shooting tactic was used in order to stop the Takeda but sadly it is impossible to confirm with accuracy and sources that Nobunaga used advanced volley fire and musket techniques.
>
> **Kazanshin** 21 August 2019 at 17:02
>
> Thank you for your reply! I was to an extent expecting it, but yeah, it's unfortunate how some of the Sengoku Jidai's most famous subjects can be myths like this. Anyways, thank you for replying, and sorry for bringing back such an old blog.
>
> **Gunsen History** 25 August 2019 at 12:37
>
> Yes indeed, but it's worth saying that beneath every myth there is a little bit of truth under the right context. So it is totally possible that Nobunaga's ashigaru did deploy fast shooting techniques.
>
> Also, don't be sorry about bringing back and old post; every article here is meant to stay on the internet for a long time, and if needed, it could be updated too. So don't worry about that!

REPLY

Thanasis 8 April 2020 at 20:34

Hi,

Are there any references in Japanese sources about using the pike as a deflecting weapon against shafted projectiles? Especially against massed archery which was the norm before gunpowder took the reins? The sources about the Ancient Greek phalangites habitually mention a controlled "flag waving" of the sarissa pike in the air in order to deflect missiles (in their case, javelins and/or arrows). Even the Roman Legionaries found that throwing their pila on a forest of pikes had little to no effect (Aemilius Paullus Macedonicus is reported to have said so).
Tests by various reenactment groups (in Greece and abroad) have suggested that a file of about 4 pikes can successfully deflect almost any javelin-sized wooden pole coming from straight opposite them. No tests have been done with arrows, as far as I know.

> **Gunsen History** 9 April 2020 at 03:53
>
> Hi!
> As far as I know there are no such references; but I can see that having hundreds of pikes in a rather small area could indeed mitigate the effects of incoming arrows. Japanese arrows were quite big but still smaller than javelins so I doubt you could have had a similar effect, but keep in mind that those men also had armor and were covered by standing shields when they had to face "direct fire" so wounds by arrows were somewhat minimized by that as well.
>
> **Thanasis** 11 April 2020 at 23:52
>
> Oh I see,
> So were the pavise-bearers a part of pike units as the were of the marksmen units? Or were the pavises brought forward by some "flying squads" which moved wherever they were needed.
>
> Btw, congratulations! Your blog is very interesting and thorough! I'm looking forward to a kama and kusarigama article. An article about army logistics would also be very interesting IMHO.
>
> **Gunsen History** 12 April 2020 at 07:04
>
> Tate shields and other form of field fortifications were deployed by archers and gunners at the start of the battle, and were then eventually used by the formations of pikemen if the latter had a more defensive role, so when the gunners and archers retreated, the pikemen could advance and exploit those defenses as well, unless they charged through.
>
> Thank you so much, I'm glad you liked it! It would be interesting indeed to cover those things!

REPLY

silver 18 January 2022 at 04:59

I wanted to ask a question like you metioned here that since to use these unwieldy pikes, formations were inevitable, and being composed by lowly rank foot soldiers, which weren't trained as much as the high ranking Samurai in the martial arts, they didn't have a great stability in terms of morale.

So i wonder did Japan like ,europe and the ottoman empire did they have an infantry revolution were as the core of the army became a standing army of profesional soldiers did this also happend in japan?

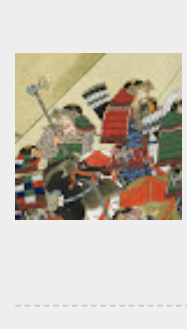
REPLY

Enter comment

Popular posts from this blog

Masakari (鉞) - The Samurai's War Axe

September 30, 2017



Masakari (鉞) - The Samurai's War Axe Samurai holding a battle axe; detail from the 春日権現験記. 第８軸 Also know as Ono (斧) or as Fuetsu (斧鉞), this weapon is one of the less related within the "Samurai warfare" context. For many years inside the internet I've read a lot of stuffs about the fact that Samurai didn't use Axes …

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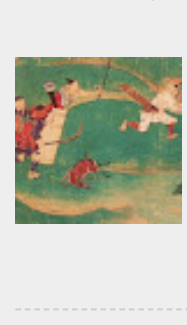
Tate & Tedate (盾 & 手盾) - Japanese Shields

December 18, 2017



Tate & Tedate (盾 & 手盾) - Japanese Shields A samurai carrying a Tate type of shield converted into a Tedate and a Nagamaki, " 石山寺縁起絵巻 ", 13th century Japanese shields are a really interesting topic to study, and an highly misunderstood one, especially inside the "pop culture". It is in fact quite common to read or hear the …

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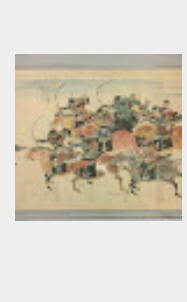
Yumi (弓) - The Japanese Bow

July 12, 2017



Wakyuu (和弓) - The Japanese Bow DISCLAIMER: Since the article is longer than the expectations, here is a little Index: - History : Different bows structure and composition from the Yayoi to the Edo Period - The asymmetry, length and draw techniques explained - Power and range : Draw weight estimation, maximum rang …

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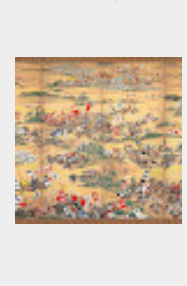
Sengoku Period Warfare: Part 1 - Army and Battle Formations

March 18, 2018



Sengoku Period Warfare: Part 1 - Army and Formations A detail from 関ヶ原合戦屏風 , late 19th century. The Sengoku period (戦国時代) is generally speaking the most interesting, intense and famous period of Japanese history. We are all familiar with the classic picture of the Ashigaru arquebusiers formation, or with the fierce …

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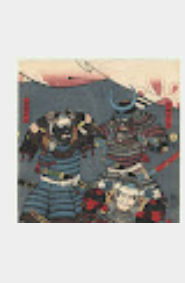
Tosei Gusoku (当世具足) - Body Coverage Explained

October 22, 2017



Japanese Armor Body Coverage Explained Warriors of the Takeda Clan donning their armor, Utagawa Sadahide (歌川 貞秀) - 武田勇士揃 As I said before in a previous post, for any serious "Armor Enthusiast", there are some questions that suddenly come to mind when looking at a full harness. Last time I've covered the weight, …

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Cagayan Battles of 1582: Debunking the Hoax

November 16, 2018

Cagayan Battles of 1582: Debunking the Hoax A picture taken from the Spanish comics "Las Espadas Del Fin Mundo" depicting the fictitious battle. Before starting to write anything about the Cagayan battle, I would like to make a premise: I'm not really a fan of the kind of debates you could find on the internet about hypothetical …

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Wantō (湾刀): Early Curved Japanese Swords

February 26, 2020

Wantō (湾刀): Early Curved Japanese Swords A classic example of a curved warabitet ō, the most common style. If you have ever tried to approach the study of Japanese swords , you might have encountered the incredible amount of different theories and the huge (and occasionally hostile) nomenclature that pervade such field. In …

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